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Does the hand that controls the cigarette packet rule the smoker? Findings from ethnographic interviews with smokers in Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and the USA

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the twentieth century, packaging was a carefully cultivated element of the appeal of the cigarette. However, the tobacco industry's control over cigarette packaging has been steadily eroded through legislation that aims to rebrand the packet from a desirable to a dangerous commodity—epitomized in Australia's introduction of plain packaging in 2012. Evident in both the enactment of cigarette packaging legislation and industry efforts to overturn it is the assumption that packets *do* things—i.e. that they have a critical role to play in either promoting or discouraging the habit. Drawing on 175 ethnographic interviews conducted with people smoking in public spaces in Vancouver, Canada; Canberra, Australia; Liverpool, England; and San Francisco, USA, we produce a 'thick description' of smokers' engagements with cigarette packets. We illustrate that despite the very different types of cigarette packaging legislation in place in the four countries, there are marked similarities in the ways smokers engage with their packets. In particular, they are not treated as a purely visual sign; instead, a primary means through which one's own cigarette packet is apprehended is by touch rather than by sight. Smokers perceive cigarette packets largely through the operations of their hands—through their 'handiness'. Thus, our study findings problematize the assumption that how smokers engage with packets when asked to do so on a purely intellectual or aesthetic level reflects how they engage with packets as they are enfolded into their everyday lives.

1. Introduction

1.1. Branding cigarette packets

The cigarette packet has long been a cultivated element of its allure—from the gleaming case of Benson and Hedges' premium 'Gold' brand to the rugged masculine appeal of Marlboros and the feminine refinement of Virginia Slims. Clearly evident in accounts about the industry and industry accounts themselves is the power—the 'charisma'—of branding (Pottage, 2013). The marketing 'guru' Louis Cheskin, responsible for the iconic Marlboro Man, labeled this effect "sensation transference", which occurs when "the auratic effects of the branded package are translated into innate qualities of the product" (cited in Pottage, 2013, p. 544). Thus, as the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library attests, the cigarette packet formed an intensive (and fetishized) focus of industry research throughout the twentieth century (Hastings et al., 2008).

The tobacco industry maintained complete control over cigarette packaging until 1965, when the USA Federal Cigarette Labeling Act required cigarette cartons and packets to carry the textual warning "Caution: Cigarette smoking may be hazardous to your health". Following the US lead, in subsequent decades many other countries introduced requirements that cigarette packets carry warning labels. However, a decisive shift occurred in 2001, when Canada became the first country in the world to introduce graphic (text- and picture-based) warning labels on cigarette packets.

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Although the legislation was ostensibly designed to inform smokers about the health effects of smoking, its purpose was clearly *persuasive* as well as *informational*. In other words, Health Canada explicitly recognized the potential of graphic warning labels to market the concept of reducing tobacco consumption, as well as promulgating factual information about the health effects of smoking (Health Canada, 2000).

In conjunction with an array of other countries, Australia followed suit in implementing graphic warning labels in 2006 and the UK in 2008. However, such efforts subsequently stalled in the USA, after the Food and Drug Administration announced its intended graphic warning labels in 2011. A legal challenge by the tobacco industry was mounted, centering on precisely the issue of the 'informational' versus 'advertising' dimensions of the proposed labels, and was instrumental to the ruling in its favor. According to the presiding District Judge, Richard Leon: "It is abundantly clear from viewing these images that the emotional response they were crafted to induce is calculated to provoke the viewer to quit, or never to start smoking—an objective wholly apart from disseminating purely factual and uncontroversial information" (Reinberg, 2012). Although the Court of Appeals has since overturned the ruling, the legislation is currently in limbo.

The notion that packets could be enrolled into the service of an anti-tobacco agenda in much the same way that they had previously served a pro-tobacco one was repeated—and dramatically extended—in Australia's implementation of world-first 'plain' packaging in December 2012. The assumption underpinning this legislation is that unbranded cigarette packets reduce the appeal of smoking, increase the salience of health warnings and correct misperceptions about the harms of tobacco use, thereby decreasing the number of young people who start smoking and increasing the number of people who quit (Dennis, 2013; McKeganey and Russell, 2015). However, as Chapman and Freeman (2014, p. xiii) observe, "there is nothing plain about Australia's plain packs", which are now dominated by hard-hitting anti-smoking appeals that take up 90% of the front of the packet and 75% of the back. This feature figured centrally in the (unsuccessful) complaint mounted by the tobacco industry in its submissions to the Australian High Court challenging the legality of the legislation. In the court case, the packet was described as "occupied" and "conscripted" to serve the Commonwealth government's purposes, thereby effectively overriding the industry's proprietary rights (Pottage, 2013, p. 521). Although the tobacco industry is pursuing various legal routes to dismantle the legislation, its lack of success has spurred other countries into considering plain packaging and the UK government has since announced its intention to implement similar legislation, which is due to go into effect in May 2016.

1.2. The agency of objects

Evident in both the enactment of cigarette packaging legislation and industry efforts to overturn it is the assumption that packets *do* things. In the view of mainstream tobacco control, a packet freed from industry branding and refurbished with 'hard-hitting' anti-smoking messages discourages purchase. In the event that cigarettes are acquired, the packet reinforces the dangers of smoking for the duration of its life, thereby presumably affecting future purchasing behavior. According to Fong (2001, p. 2), "An individual who smokes one pack per day, for example, is potentially exposed to the health warning 7300 times in a single year". This view is endorsed by the World Health Organization (2011), which notes: "prominent health warning labels … provide the most direct health messages to smokers and potentially reach smokers *every time* they purchase or consume tobacco products" (p. 22–23, emphasis added). As this statement suggests, there is a clear recognition of the ways in which the traditional 'power' of the package to shape how smokers interpret its contents may be *disrupted* and *redirected* to serve the interests of tobacco control rather than the tobacco industry.

Despite the diametrically opposed agendas of these two entities, both groups share the assumption that the branded aesthetics of the cigarette packet (of either danger or desire, depending on who is in charge) shape smokers' responses to its content. In both scenarios, the packet is deemed to have a degree of *agency*—an agency that is sometimes seen to subsume or override that of the smoker. Thus, if the 'Modern Constitution' is based on a conceptual divide between humans and non-humans (Latour, 1993), branding and advertising are areas where it clearly breaks down. As Cronin (2004) observes, the imagined animation of commodities troubles distinctions between the categories of 'person' and 'thing'. For example, in a 2008 commentary on plain packaging, Hastings, Gallopel-Morvan and Rey state: "It is abundantly clear that young people are drawn into smoking by branding and that liveried packs play an *active role* in this process" (p. 361, emphasis added). In such framings, the industry-branded packet becomes a "silent salesman" (Chantler, 2014, p. 4; Chapman and Freeman, 2014, p. 35) that enacts a "poisonous seduction" against "susceptible" minds (Hastings et al., 2008, p. 361), with an unbranded (or rebranded) packet logically seen to reverse these effects.

In this paper we take seriously the idea of the agency of objects, but in ways rather different from such representations of cigarette packaging. As Latour (2005, p. 71) observes,

> there is hardly any doubt that kettles 'boil' water, knifes [sic] 'cut' meat, baskets 'hold' provisions, hammers 'hit' nails on the head, rails 'keep' kids from falling, locks 'close' rooms against uninvited visitors, soap 'takes' the dirt away, schedules 'list' class sessions, price tags 'help' people calculating, and so on … This, of course, does not mean that baskets 'cause' the fetching of provisions or that hammers 'impose' the hitting of the nail.

The highly politicized context of cigarette packaging legislation has clearly been instrumental to such framings, given the need for a clear and compelling policy narrative about the effects of branding. However, there are "many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence" (Latour, 2005, p. 72). Indeed, claims about the efficacy of branding do not unambiguously translate into changes in product sales (Cronin, 2004)—as recent debates about the impact of plain packaging in Australia attest (see McKeganey and Russell, 2015). Following Cronin (2004, p. 63), we would suggest that the truth of such effects is indeterminate "and ultimately less significant than the discursive work to which claims about those effects are put".

In what follows, we take the view that cigarette packets are both material products and mobile signs, and we are interested in their "complex, protean and only half-appreciated" social lives (Cronin, 2004, pp. 3–4). With this in mind, we attend closely to the *experienced* (as opposed to *assumed*) relationships forged between cigarette smokers and packets based on ethnographic interviews conducted in Vancouver, Canada; Canberra, Australia; Liverpool, England; and San Francisco, USA. In conducting this research, our goal was to try to understand how people engage with cigarette packets in the context of smoking itself in aid of producing a 'thick(er) description' (Geertz, 1973) of this phenomenon than has dominated studies of cigarette packaging to date.

2. The study and setting

Between October 2013 and March 2015, we carried out *in situ* interviews with people smoking in public spaces at the four

fieldsites: 60 in Vancouver, 70 in Canberra, 60 in Liverpool and 55 in San Francisco. Despite our declared intention to produce a 'thick description' of smokers' engagement with cigarette packets, our study does not have all the hallmarks of a typical ethnographic endeavor. We did not have particular fieldsites we wedded ourselves to and revisited time and again; nor did we develop long-term relationships with participants in the study—interviews instead took the form of one-off encounters with people smoking in public in a variety of settings. However, the interviews we carried out are characterized by the key ethnographic intention to get at 'thickness' and 'livedness' as people engaged in the aspect of social life in which we were interested, and how they described it to us as they practiced it.

In each city, we visited a number of sites in an attempt to reach smokers of different classes, ages and backgrounds. These sites varied from city to city but included: downtown cores, business districts, ethnic enclaves, neighborhoods known for their diversity, universities, colleges, hospitals, pubs, parks, and shopping centers. We did not approach everyone we saw smoking—we used our discretion, focusing on people we thought would be open to talking (e.g. people who were stationery, people who had just lit a cigarette, people not intensively engaged in an activity where we judged interruptions would be viewed with annoyance). Although we initially planned to talk to smokers 16 or over, this is something the majority of our institutional ethics review committees balked at without parental consent. The youngest person interviewed was 17 in Canberra, 19 in Vancouver, and 18 in Liverpool and San Francisco. The proportion of men and women we interviewed was relatively equal across the four sites, but despite our efforts to approach a diverse array of smokers, the majority of people interviewed at each site were white.

After briefly explaining the study, we asked if people were willing to chat and proceeded if they affirmed their interest in doing so. Although the majority of people we approached agreed to be interviewed, their general willingness to do so varied from site to site; for example, only 10% of those approached in Vancouver declined to talk, in contrast to 30% in San Francisco. We did not obtain written consent for the interviews, which would have undermined their informal and contextual nature—a fact our respective ethics committees recognized. Not all interviews were recorded, although the percentage varied from site to site. Again, we used our discretion in asking permission to record interviews based on our sense of whether this might inhibit conversation; interviewees also regularly declined to be recorded, preferring to keep things informal. In all such instances, jottings were fleshed out into fieldnotes immediately following the interview.

At the outset of the study, we devised an interview schedule comprising several core questions about participants' engagement with cigarette packets, but, as is often the case in ethnographic interview contexts, the conversations at each site also reflected our own individual research interests and the specificities of the local social and legislative contexts (see Table 1 for an overview). Participants themselves also shaped interviews— particularly their temporal dimensions. Some interviews lasted for the time it took for the participant to smoke a single cigarette: at the point of its extinguishment, so too was the conversation. Sometimes, an interview lasted for the course of two cigarettes chain-smoked in rapid succession. Frequently, interviewees indicated that their time was limited at the outset, but stayed chatting after they finished smoking, clearly enjoying the conversation.

In many respects, our study was designed to supplement—and speak back to—the International Tobacco Control Four Country Survey, a longitudinal cohort survey carried out in the four countries we examine here. An underlying premise of the survey is that countries with more extensive legislation in place act as a model of what will occur in countries with laxer legislation; in other words, legislation is treated as the independent variable and smoking as the dependent one (see Hammond et al., 2006). In this paper, we attenuate this view through an examination of themes that reoccurred in interviews across all four fieldsites, despite the marked differences between cigarette packages in each context (see Fig. 1).

With this agenda in mind, the analysis we present is based two interrelated aspects of our interview data: 1) how participants responded to cigarette packets as a *sign*, and 2) how participants responded to cigarette packets as an *object*. We generated data around the first theme through questions such as, "how much attention do you pay to the warning label?", "Do you think the warning label has an impact on your smoking?", "Do you think warning labels have an impact on other smokers?". The second theme was investigated via questions about how smokers engaged with their own cigarette packet and packets we showed them from other countries (especially the Australian packet).

We did not pool data emerging from these enquiries and then subject it to analysis; such a process would have served to erase context, which we were concerned to preserve. Instead, at each site we individually analyzed our interview data via standard ethnographic coding processes (see Emerson et al., 1995) and developed a list of key themes that were then jointly discussed to determine those common to each of the fieldsites. Thus, it is important to bear in mind that the themes discussed below are not necessarily the most common at *each* of the four individual fieldsites, but instead those that consistently reoccurred *across* them. All names presented in the findings are pseudonyms. Institutional ethics approval for the study was obtained from the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board, the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee, the University of Liverpool Research Ethics Committee and the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation Institutional Review Board.

3. Findings

3.1. Not looking and looking away

Across all four fieldsites, most interviewees told us that they paid little attention to the warning label on their pack of cigarettes. This is perhaps to be expected in San Francisco, given the small textual label on the side of US packets. Indeed, interviewees frequently mentioned the "Surgeon General's warning" but could only broadly recall messages (about lung cancer, etc.). For example, Brian ("I'm about to be 33") and Kimmy (28) were a white couple interviewed together in the Mission District in San Francisco as they enjoyed a smoke outside a bar. Brian had recently returned to smoking after a year of abstinence and according to Kimmy, who purchased the pack they were smoking, "he hasn't, you know, officially become a smoker again". They tended to finish each other's thoughts throughout the interview, a phenomenon that also occurred when they were asked about the warning labels on cigarettes. Kimmy noted: "I mean, the thing I notice most is just saying 'Surgeon General's warning' in big, bold capital print". Brian interjected "And the rest is blah, blah, blah". Kimmy agreed; "Yeah, the rest is blah, blah, blah".

While we might assume that the inconspicuous nature of the US warning labels explained smokers' responses, this lack of recall and attention was equally evident at sites with large and confrontational graphic labels in place. For example, in Canberra, most interviewees could not say what health warning label was on their packet without first looking at it. Typically, smokers would retrieve their packet from a pocket or a bag or, if it lay on the table or seat next to them, pick it up, examine it, and then comment on it. For example, Ben, a 35-year-old white office worker in Canberra,

Table 1
Overview of the social and legislative context of smoking in the four fieldsites.

Legislation	Vancouver, Canada	Canberra, Australia	Liverpool, England	San Francisco, USA
Smoking prevalence	14% in BC	14% in the ACT	24.5% in Liverpool	12% in CA
Smoking bans	Comprehensive indoor smoking ban Ban within 6 m of building entrances & exits Ban at all commercial outdoor eating areas Ban in City parks and beaches	Comprehensive indoor smoking ban Ban at all commercial outdoor eating areas	Comprehensive smoking ban in all enclosed and substantially enclosed spaces	Comprehensive indoor smoking ban Smoking ban within 20 feet of City buildings Ban in City parks, outdoor street fairs and festivals
Cigarette packaging	Graphic warning labels cover 75% of both sides of the pack	Packets are free of industry branding; graphic warning labels cover 90% of the front and 75% of the back	Graphic warning labels cover 30% of the front and back of the pack	Small text-based warning labels on the sides or front of the pack
Promotion & advertising	Total ban on cigarette advertising Ban on display of tobacco products in locations selling tobacco	Total ban on cigarette advertising Ban on display of tobacco products in locations selling tobacco	General ban on cigarette advertising with the exception of point of sale display in pubs, clubs and shops. Since April 2012, larger shops such as supermarkets are required to cover their displays of cigarettes	Ban on TV advertising Ban on magazine advertising in publications targeting children Ban on billboards, public transit
Smoking cessation support	Free support inc. access to nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) available through BC Smoking Cessation Program	Free support available through Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT	Free support inc. access to NRT available through NHS stop smoking services	Free support available through California Smokers' Helpline Free patches available to eligible smokers

handed Simone his packet when she asked to see it. “What are your thoughts on this one?” she enquired of him, when he proffered the crumpled, almost empty, packet from his pocket. “Which one have I got there?” he enquired back. “It's this one, with the teeth on it”, Simone responded, showing him the front face of the packet (see Fig. 2). “Well, it's not too pleasant” Ben replied; “But not the worst one, either”.

Likewise, in Liverpool, only four of the 60 smokers could recall the label on the packet they were carrying with them, and most indicated that they did not look at it. Mabel, a 64-year-old white woman, was typical in this respect. Mabel was approached outside a hospital where she was currently an in-patient being treated for lung cancer. She happened to be holding her packet as she smoked a cigarette and when asked about the warning label on it she responded: “I haven't even looked at it, I don't even look at it now”. She then perused the warning label on her pack of Windsor Blues, which featured a close-up image of a man with a grotesque neck tumor (the current series of European Union pictures is being phased out, but this label is visible on the back of the UK cigarette packet in Fig. 1). She began to read out the label before pausing to remark, “Ugh, I *hate* when it's got that on!”

These kinds of responses were repeated almost verbatim in Vancouver, where very few interviewees could recall specific details about the warning label on the packet of cigarettes they were currently smoking. The most common responses were: “No idea”, “no, I don't look at it” or “I pay no attention”. Even in the two instances where smokers could correctly identify the warning label on their packet, their comments were suggestive of an engagement more complex than the simple act of ‘looking’. For example, Aaron, a 40-year-old white engineer originally from New Zealand, was interviewed at a downtown community garden where he was enjoying a smoke on an unusually sunny day. Aaron, who migrated to Vancouver seven years previously, was currently trying to quit, although rather pessimistic about his ability to do so. When Kirsten asked if he could recall the warning label on his packet, Aaron immediately responded: “the sick woman. Tarbox?” Once they confirmed the label on the packet Kirsten asked if Aaron could recall other warning labels and he thought about it for a few moments and responded: “the limp dick, the eyeball with the needle in it, the kid in the car”.

Aaron's comments speak to a phenomenon witnessed at all the fieldsites: some labels are clearly far more memorable for participants than others. Indeed, it is worth noting that the “tobacco use can make you impotent” label (Fig. 3) is not actually part of the current series of Canadian warning labels; it was phased out in 2011 when larger, ‘harder-hitting’ warning labels were introduced. As Aaron migrated to Canada in the mid 2000s, he would certainly have seen it, but a cigarette packet bearing this label would not physically have crossed his palm for the past three years. Thus, such ostensible acts of recall may speak more to what smokers *expect to see* on a packet than describing what they *actually saw*.

To varying degrees, these views challenge the idea of warning labels as something that are straightforwardly ‘read’ by smokers when they purchase a pack. As we noted at the outset, a basic assumption underwriting the introduction of cigarette packaging legislation is that smokers are forced to engage with them *each and every time* they reach for a cigarette. Indeed, an explicit part of the logic of plain packaging legislation is the assumption that without industry branding to distract them, smokers will be forced to engage with the warning label. However, while participants consistently emphasized their lack of attention to the warning labels and this was concretely manifested in their inability to recall them, certain labels clearly *did* register in some way. At the three fieldsites with graphic labels in place, participants frequently singled out especially abject and “gross” labels (e.g. “the eye with a needle in it” and “rotting tongue” in Vancouver; in Canberra “the baby one” and “the teeth one”; in Liverpool “the teeth one” and “the throat one”). Thus, in some instances this inattention could be more accurately glossed as a kind of active looking away. In Radley's (2002) words,

> What happens when we turn away from an explicit image of this kind? In turning away from the image the observer completes—in one particular way—the act of interpretation, inasmuch as it is developed at all. When we do this we remove the depiction from our view so that with its removal the ‘difficulty’ of its appearance is suppressed, if not entirely extinguished (p. 5, emphasis added).

Fig. 1. Front (top) and back (bottom) of an Australian, Canadian, UK and US cigarette packet (photographs by Katrina Ham; property of the authors).

3.2. Techniques of avoidance, refusals of engagement

As already hinted at, techniques of avoidance were common throughout the three fieldsites with graphic warning labels in place, a phenomenon that has also been reported in a recent qualitative study on Australian smokers' responses to plain packaging (see Hardcastle et al., 2015). In Vancouver and Canberra, a minority of participants decanted cigarettes to other containers or certain packets were exchanged for ones with less threatening warnings (6 of 60 in Vancouver, 9 of 70 in Canberra). However, we are interested here in the more common—and less overt—forms of avoidance we witnessed at all three fieldsites, which did not relate to changing the packet but instead the forms of visual and bodily engagement with it.

Various participants explained their efforts to avoid engaging with the pack, outlining their specific techniques for minimizing contact with it. Take Becky, a white 53-year-old administrator from Liverpool interviewed while she was on a break outside of her office building. A stylish dresser who had smoked since the age of 15, Becky described taking cigarettes directly from her bag by touch at her desk, and then smoking them singly outside. “Out of sight, out of mind” she observed. She continued:

> I buy in a multi-pack, so I put them in the cupboard, I take a packet out, take them into work. I'm not necessarily ever really looking at that packet, because when I come out of here, I go into my bag, I open the cigarettes, take the cigarette out and walk out here, so I'm not even looking at the box, really.

Becky insisted that this concealment was less about her personal dislike of the pictures and messages and more about the fear of other people's reactions. In her words: “One thing I have noticed is I won't put the cigarettes out on a table now, you know, in a pub or a restaurant, and it's not because it's bothering me, the picture, but I think other people are going to judge”.

Fig. 2. The Australian “teeth” warning label (Health Warning Image© Professor Laurence J. Walsh, the University of Queensland, reproduced with permission of the Commonwealth of Australia).

Fig. 3. The “tobacco use can make you impotent” label (Licensed under Health Canada copyright; reproduced with permission).

While various participants described such acts of visual avoidance to us, in numerous instances we also witnessed them ourselves. For example, Rob, a white 45-year-old secondary school teacher interviewed in Canberra, was waiting for his wife to pick up a cake order for a family occasion when they chatted. It was a cool day, and when Simone asked to see his packet, Rob drew it out from his coat pocket and noted it was "the heart muscle photo" (Fig. 4). When she asked how he responded to the images, Rob said he found them "disturbing; I think it's a bit off, really, for it to be allowed. They don't show diseased livers on wine casks". As he put the packet back into his pocket, he remarked, "this jacket is good, because I can keep the pack in there and not have to see it". When Simone questioned him further, Rob explained that the pocket was large enough to accommodate his hand and the pack, so he did not have to draw it out to retrieve a cigarette. The whole operation could be done in the darkness of the pocket, entirely out of Rob's sight. When she asked if this was something he did when he wasn't wearing this particular jacket, Rob responded, "I keep it out of my sight probably most of the time—my choice to look at it, same as it's my choice to smoke".

In other cases, the hand itself served to envelop the label. Kirsten met Vlad on Commercial Drive—one of Vancouver's most diverse neighborhoods, where hipsters and homeless people regularly rub shoulders. Fifty-eight-year-old Vlad, originally from Croatia, was on a break from his job as a painter when they chatted. He had started smoking at 18, and glumly noted that he knew he was going to have to quit smoking at some point for good—he was a diabetic, and his doctor had started giving him ultimatums. When Kirsten asked about the labels, he responded that he did not look at them when he opened the packet. "I don't care about what's on the packet, just what's in it!" he declared. Using his pack of black market cigarettes, Vlad then demonstrated his technique for opening his packet. Placing his left hand over the front of the packet, he used his right thumb to flip it open, thus hiding it entirely from view.

At first glance, informants' comments about cigarette packets might seem somewhat contradictory—to varying degrees all suggested that the images on the packet did not matter, yet all took steps to avoid them. However, read another way, their accounts speak to the role of packets not just—or primarily—as a visual *sign*, but as a tangible *object*. After all, while tobacco control and the tobacco industry might be intensely preoccupied with significatory power of the packet, for smokers their primary function resides in their ability to hold cigarettes, whilst simultaneously keeping them readily accessible and protecting them from damage.

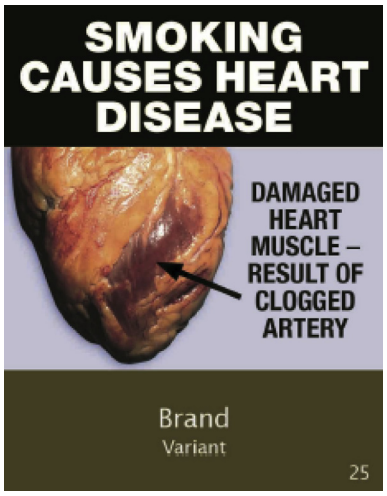

Fig. 4. The Australian "heart muscle" label (Health Warning Image© Winnipeg Regional Health Authority; reproduced with permission of the Commonwealth of Australia).

As fieldwork progressed we came to realize that a primary means through which one's cigarette packet is apprehended is by touch rather than by sight. Smokers 'see' cigarette packets largely through the operations of their hands—hands are placed in bags and pockets as people fumble about for their smokes; they are opened with fingers that remove cellophane and foil and reach into the packet to draw out a cigarette. Thus, we might say that cigarette packets exhibit the quality of 'handiness' in Heidegger's sense of the term. For Heidegger, we encounter objects not primarily through their appearance but through their 'handiness'. In his now-famous example of the hammer, he explains:

> The less we stare at the thing called hammer, the more we take hold of it and use it, the more original our relation to it becomes and the more undisguisedly it is encountered for what it is, as a useful thing. The act of hammering itself discovers the specific 'handiness' of the hammer. We shall call the useful thing's kind of being in which it reveals itself by itself *handiness* ([1953]2010, p. 69, emphasis in original).

This contrast Heidegger draws between the 'outward appearance' of things (or their 'presence-at-hand') and their 'handiness' (or 'readiness-to-hand') is critical to understanding smokers' engagement with cigarette packets.

To redeploy the hammer example, when the skilled carpenter is engaged in trouble-free hammering, she has "no conscious recognition of the hammer, the nails, or the work-bench, *in the way that one would if one simply stood back and thought about them*" (Wheeler, 2011, emphasis in original). Clearly, for a minority of smokers in Vancouver and Canberra, the altered packets have had the effect of forcing a new aesthetic relation, one which has compromised its 'handiness' to the extent that it becomes effectively unusable. However, for the most part, these new visual attributes did not undermine its usability or fundamentally transform smokers' relation to the packet. As Biddle (1993, p. 189) notes, drawing on the insights of Merleau-Ponty, "The materiality of what surrounds you embodies attitude and orientation, in so far as you develop habits, relations of being, with these objects". Moreover, such interactions generally occur in the context of years of habitual engagement. This is not to say that the visual aspect of such things is irrelevant. According to Heidegger, their use is not blind; rather, "it has its own way of seeing which guides our operations and gives them their specific certainty" (p. 70).

3.3. Comparing packets

With such insights in mind we can begin to make sense of smokers' responses to the Australian plain packet. For the most part, smokers we interviewed in Vancouver, Liverpool and San Francisco insisted that the Australian packet would have no impact on their smoking, although they varied substantially in their degree of receptiveness to this type of packaging—with some taking the view that "it can't hurt to try" and others condemning such legislation as patronizing and offensive. Regardless of the interviewee's individual smoking history, the almost universal refrain we heard was "it wouldn't make a difference to me personally". Numerous participants asserted that, in effect, it was too "late" for them—because they already smoked and knew their brand, it did not really matter what the packet looked like. Many also emphasized that they were well aware of the risks of smoking, so efforts to replace industry branding with warning labels would "not be telling me anything I don't already know".

However, while few of the people we interviewed suggested that plain packaging would affect their own smoking, this was generally accompanied by the proposition that it *might* impact kids or "people who haven't yet started smoking". For example, George, a white 31-year-old chef, was interviewed on the front steps of the downtown San Francisco restaurant where he worked. George had smoked on and off since the age of 15, quitting for six-month periods before being "pulled back" by his "enjoyment" of cigarettes. When asked about what he thought of warning labels, he noted: "I've seen pictures of what they do in other countries, like, they'll have terrible graphic images of dead lungs or premature fetuses, whatever. I would probably still smoke. I don't know if it would make much difference". When pushed about what impact it might have if graphic labels (in all senses) were introduced in the US, he thought about it for a few moments and responded, "I think it would help maybe a bit … like stopping kids from buying them, maybe, or keep them from smoking at a young age maybe".

This view was also frequently voiced in Australia itself, where various informants similarly highlighted the potential role of plain packets in reducing the uptake of smoking. Kaylee, a 42-year-old stay-at-home mother, was typical in this respect. Interviewed outside a Canberra shopping centre with her children (aged 12 and 14) in tow, Kaylee commented that the warning labels would likely have more of an impact on kids than her generation: "That's how they [cigarettes] are these days, a dangerous thing, and that's what kids think they are. They don't question that—smoking isn't cool anymore, I'm not cool; I'm killing myself. Tomorrow's adults will not question the health warnings, they will just accept that that is what cigarettes are". However, Kaylee's comments, in tandem with those of many other smokers we interviewed, clearly emphasized the ways in which the social environment surrounding smoking had fundamentally changed, suggesting that the 'effects' of packaging on non-smokers were disentanglable from this larger context.

Indeed, for some participants it was *precisely* this context that made cigarette packaging itself largely irrelevant. James, a white 50-year-old smoker from Liverpool, was interviewed outside a pub shortly after he stepped out for a cigarette. As a smoker for over 30 years, and one who was directly bearing the effects of the introduction of England's smoke-free legislation in 2007, James did not believe that the change to plain packets was enough to further transform the already radically altered environment of smoking. For him, the work of visibly stigmatizing smokers had already taken place, so the appearance of the packet no longer meant what it once had. In his words:

> I mean, you're somewhat of a pariah anyway if you smoke, so the idea of taking out a packet of cigarettes which doesn't have its own branding on, I mean, I don't think anyone—[thinks] 'Ooh, look he's smoking such and such', you know? That just doesn't exist anymore, so—so I think it just won't have any effect on anyone I don't think.

His underlying point was that people who begin smoking now do so in an environment markedly different from that in which he took up the habit, so the meaning of branding had irrevocably altered.

In a minority of cases, especially when comparing their own cigarette packages to ones from countries with stronger warning labels in place, some participants did assert a correlation between warning strength and quitting. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this view was expressed most frequently in San Francisco, where interviewees commonly mentioned more "graphic" and "grotesque" cigarette packets they had seen in other countries. While only a minority thought such packets would impact their smoking, these departures from the norm were once again instructive in their own right. For example, 30-year-old Jolene, who had a background in marketing, was interviewed at a park near the Embarcadero in San Francisco. When asked what the warning label on her pack of Parliaments said, she responded: "I don't pay too much attention to it. It's really in light lettering; it's not something that stands out particularly." Jolene attributed her lack of recall to the relatively inconspicuous nature of the US labels. In her words,

> I've done quite a bit of traveling. Spain was probably the most interesting because they would have actual pictures of decayed lungs on them. Uh, I've seen that in Canada as well, bright, bold, black lettering with white backgrounds with 'smoking kills' … I think it draws it to the forefront and makes you feel really bad about it.

Yet this assumption that more prominent warning labels would have an effect was occasionally asserted amongst interviewees *regardless of the type of warning label on their packet*. Thus, while several informants from San Francisco suggested that the prominent graphic warning labels in Canada were likely to be more effective than the US labels, the vast majority of locals in Vancouver insisted that the Canadian labels had no impact on their smoking, although fifty-seven-year-old John, originally from California, asserted that the Australian packet would probably do the trick.

John had been living in Vancouver for the past seven years when Kirsten interviewed him; they met out the front of a local hospital where he had been in for a checkup, having broken his back in a construction site accident when preparations for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics were under way. John was very unhappy about his smoking and was determined to quit at some point, although he clearly was not optimistic about his capacity, declaring that he had smoked "since before birth—my mother was a smoker". When they discussed the health warnings, John was unable to recall the specific label on his pack, responding: "I don't even notice it". However, as they scrutinized John's cigarette packet together he speculated that: "If it covered the whole pack, maybe then I might pay attention to it". When Kirsten showed him an Australian packet he immediately responded, "See that would discourage me, right there!"

In many respects, such narratives about other 'stronger' packets potentially eliciting the sort of response one's own packet failed to produce echo the prevailing public health assumptions about cigarette packaging—i.e. that more prominent warning labels are more effective. But we suggest that such responses are illustrative of precisely the split we mentioned earlier between an engagement with packets as purely visual objects and one's *own* packet as a useable or 'handy' thing, perspectives that are distinct and largely incommensurable.

4. Discussion

Despite the legislative attention currently focused on cigarette packets as a means of reducing tobacco consumption, for the smokers we interviewed, *regardless* of the outward appearance of their packets, they typically came to be enfolded into a context of existing habitual engagement wherein the visual attributes of the packet were markedly less relevant than its other attributes. These relations formed an existing context through which new pack elements were interpreted, encountered and dealt with. Such relations proved enduring and not so easily broken—clearly, otherwise many smokers would not have such difficulty in relinquishing the habit (Dennis, 2011).

Our study findings therefore problematize the assumption that how established smokers engage with packets when asked to do so on a purely intellectual or aesthetic level reflects how they engage

with packets as they are enfolded into their everyday lives. This assumption is embedded in virtually all of the research on cigarette packaging that has been conducted to date—from experimental studies, to large-scale surveys, to qualitative research. For example, Mead et al. (2015) have recently explored the ways that low-income smokers in Baltimore engage with graphic warning labels—including many of the same labels in place at our fieldsites. They note that: "participants were asked about their cognitive and affective reactions to each label (such as what was the main message of the label and how it made them feel) and which labels were most likely to motivate them to quit" (p. 3). Participants in the focus groups did so readily and their responses were taken at face value, with the research team reporting: "we found that participants were most motivated by labels portraying the negative consequences of smoking" (p. 8). However, examining cigarette packets as they circulate in smoking practice produces a rather different view of the ostensible 'power' of the packet.

Although an underlying premise of Mead et al.'s study—and of cigarette packaging legislation more broadly—is that smokers repeatedly engage with the warning label on the packet, this view is not borne out by our research at any of the four fieldsites, *regardless* of the form of cigarette packaging in place. In our view, this is explained by the fact that smokers do not generally engage with their packets as objects viewed primarily through the lens of their outward appearance, but through their 'handiness'. This is not to suggest that the appearance of the packet is irrelevant; that some smokers make conscious efforts to avoid the warning labels affirms this. Indeed, there are clearly instances where the rebranded packet *does* disrupt habitual engagements, fundamentally compromising its handiness. However, this transformed relationship with the packet does not necessarily transform smokers' relationship with the objects it contains. Smokes can be decanted into other containers; packets can be exchanged; various bodily techniques that avoid visual engagement can emerge that become as habitual as smoking itself.

At this point in the paper, readers might expect to see some caveats presented about the generalizability of our data, and the limitations imposed by our ethnographic approach. However, in disciplinary conversations about what constitutes evidence in anthropology, various scholars have suggested that anthropological work *is* generalizable, if the parameters of this concept are expanded. For example, Fassin (2015) differentiates between 'extensive' and 'comprehensive' generalization. The former is about extending local findings to make general statements and is characterized by sampling methods that aim to ensure the representativeness of the data—the International Tobacco Control Four Country Survey is an exemplar of this type. Comprehensive generalization, on the other hand, is about identifying processes and mechanisms of general value, although they will not be found everywhere; Fassin argues that ethnography enables the latter kind of generalization. Similar arguments are found in Hastrup's (2004) distinction between 'horizontal' and 'vertical' generalization, with the latter focused not on "wall-to-wall" generalizations, but instead concerned with the processes by which meanings are established, challenged and altered. In this way, we might think of our fieldwork as akin to "dipping into a river repeatedly at different locations to determine whether the water is of the same quality with the same kind of sediments and minerals on a consistent basis" (Csordas, 2004, p. 475). Based on these dips, and the consistency of the sediments we found, it is evident that straightforward assertions about the impact of rebranded cigarette packets on current smokers need to be treated with a considerable degree of caution.

Obviously, we are not attempting to speak to the way that non-smokers engage with rebranded packets, although the 'potential smoker' is a key—perhaps *the* key—legislative target of plain packaging initiatives (see Chapman and Freeman, 2014). Yet, if this is a limitation of our study, it is equally a limitation of all available research into this topic, because such examinations must necessarily be speculative (Chantler, 2014). At present, the response of the 'potential smoker' to cigarette packaging is assessed in much the same way as that of the smoker herself—namely, through mockups of plain packaging presented to subjects asked to rate their visual appeal (Chantler, 2014). Indeed, such studies are typically conducted with smokers themselves, or include mixed populations of smokers and non-smokers (see Moodie et al., 2012, 2013), with the assumption that the former is a proxy for the latter or that similar responses from both speak to the universal appeal (or lack thereof) of packaging and its likely effects on smoking 'behavior'.

Beyond our concerns about the ways such research asks participants to engage with packets on a purely aesthetic level, our study results suggest the need for caution in generalizing from current smokers to potential smokers. Recall that most participants articulated a clear distinction between their own experiences and that of people who have not started smoking yet. They generally asserted that plain and graphic packs had no impact on their own smoking but that they *might* stop people from taking up the habit—because enduring relations had not yet been forged, valued, and sufficiently embodied as to form a context for encountering packets. Such informants also thought that it would be hard for new smokers to establish relationships with plain and graphic packets, as these objects would set the tone for unpleasant encounters. We are not suggesting that these comments merely be taken at face value as evidence that cigarette packaging legislation does not 'work' for current smokers but it will 'work' for future ones; however, they do suggest that packaging might hold different meanings for these groups.

While the 'charisma' of cigarette brands is often treated as an effect of the "progressive development of branding semantics that was evolved by the tobacco industry's advertising agencies in the decades that preceded the general proscription of tobacco advertising" (Pottage, 2013, p. 527), in light of these proscriptions and the others that have accompanied them (smoking bans, etc.) can we assume that branding means the same thing now as it did 20 years ago—or even ten? As Cochoy notes, "Far from being a space in which one and the same speaker can express themselves freely, a package is a forum, a space of public expression, in which a host of different messages intersect, interconnect, and jostle one another" (in Pottage, 2013, p. 526).

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have not attempted to answer the question of whether plain packets and/or those adorned with large and threatening warning labels 'work', although we recognize that it is of intense interest in public health and tobacco control circles. As we stated at the outset, we feel this question cannot actually be answered in the terms that legislators expect. While discussions of effects have a clear role to play in promoting or repressing political agendas around cigarette packaging, the effects themselves are ultimately indeterminate (c.f. Cronin, 2004). To some extent, there appears to be growing recognition of this, given the ways that discourses on plain packaging changed pre- and post-implementation in Australia. As McKeganey and Russell (2015) observe, advocates who initially promoted plain packaging as the equivalent of a "vaccine that works very well against lung cancer" two years into the legislation had begun to characterize it as having a "slow burning distal impact" (p. 566). Yet, while discourses on plain packaging may have become less linear and absolute in tone, the focus is still very much on how smokers (and non-smokers)

engage with packets as a visual sign. However, if our research has shown one thing, it is that we cannot understand smokers' interactions with the cigarette packets that circulate in their lives purely in such terms—and we suspect that potential smokers' engagements are equally complex.

Simply put, we cannot treat the cigarette packet as a tabula rasa upon which the tobacco industry or the government inscribes meaning and induces a certain kind of response. Nor are we attempting to invert this view to suggest that cigarette packets are inert and their meaning is that which smokers make of them. Instead, we suggest that if packets bear with them their encounters with operations (with the industry and the state) that would bend them to a certain kind of work, they equally bear the hallmarks of *other* encounters and circulations. For current smokers, these engagements are primarily bodily, often registered specifically in and through the operations of touch, and speak to the ways in which cigarette packets come to be 'seen' through embodied interactions in which the visual dimensions of the packet are often markedly less important than its handiness or usability.

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